

# The Origins of War

*Violence in Prehistory*

Jean Guilaine and Jean Zammit

*Translated by Melanie Hersey*



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# *Preface*

Is it all just a sign of our times? War is breaking out again in Europe (Serbia, Chechnya, and Kosovo) following a prolonged spell of peace. At the same time violence, the result of economic inequality and social exclusion, is claiming our cities and, at times, our countryside too. Could this explain why prehistorians have recently turned their attention to analyzing and reanalyzing war and conflict? Political and economic factors have always shaped the discipline of archeology, and continue to do so. For some three-quarters of a century (1870–1945), Europe lived either through war or with the threat of war and experienced troop movements, displacements, and deportations. As a result, the focus of history has always been upon events and those involved, upon conflicts, territorial divisions, and dissolutions imposed by foreign intervention. During times of peace, history and archeology as disciplines have both endeavored to adopt a more peace-oriented approach, conducting detailed studies into the daily lives of ordinary people and focusing upon technical developments, changes in the indigenous culture, the progressive taming of nature, and, more recently, human beings as a species.

However, for a number of years, the issue of violence among prehistoric populations has been a popular topic of investigation. The steady increase in archeological evidence has doubtless played a crucial role in bettering our understanding of a field which has long remained inexact and unsubstantiated owing to a lack of documentation. Yet despite all the difficulties associated with this discipline (evidence becoming increasingly scarce the further back in time one goes, difficulty in interpreting certain documents), the view that prehistoric people did not always live in peace and solidarity with one another is still widely held. It is also important to note that prehistory is not a uniform whole but can be divided into periods of time varying in length and characterized by distinct differences in technical, cultural, and economic progress. This diversity is all the more marked at a global level as civilizations

flourished and diversified, adapting to the broad range of physical and social environments. In assigning prehistory to the realms of a far-away and long-forgotten era, many a historian has committed the grave methodological error of equating the advent of writing with the onset of an organized world; a mistake not least because all of the oral cultures predating the introduction of writing systems (as well as those oral cultures that continued to exist long afterwards) were highly sophisticated in certain regards, a fact that often fails to be recognized. The archeology of the ancient Near East (where some of the earliest writing systems originated) is particularly revealing. Signs of progress date from well before the advent of writing: the “invention” of agriculture and cattle breeding in the eighth millennium before the common era (BCE), the existence of towns from the fourth millennium BCE onwards, the introduction of relatively stable governing powers maintained by elites or dynasties, social tensions, exchange systems operating over wide areas, and deities that were subsequently developed and elaborated by the rural and later urban populations. In order to arrive at such a high degree of social stratification, it would be difficult to comprehend how prehistoric societies would not have encountered inevitable force, tension, and conflict along the way.

The problem becomes all the more complex when we turn our attention to the earliest prehistoric populations which, over a period of 2.5 million years, never developed agriculture, relying instead upon nature by hunting wild animals, fishing, collecting molluscs, and gathering leaves, roots, and fruit. These societies had very low populations which increased only very slightly over thousands of years. Thus, it is tempting to dismiss them as fraternal, calm, and altruistic societies, feasting on the bountiful fruits of nature: a real Garden of Eden. Conclusive archeological evidence is scarce, making such assumptions impossible to prove or disprove at times. In this work we shall endeavor to present a somewhat less peace-oriented impression of *Homo sapiens*, drawing examples from the most recent hunter-gatherer societies (“Epipaleolithic-Mesolithic”). It is important to bear in mind that, even if the presence of violent behavior in the Upper Paleolithic era can be confirmed, all interpretations of this behavior remain speculative, particularly where the earliest periods of human existence are concerned. For this reason, this work will focus primarily upon the most advanced stages of prehistoric society: the Neolithic and the Bronze Age.

The role of prehistoric warfare has often been underestimated and labeled a minor and very sporadic activity; prehistoric societies are often perceived to have been largely peaceful. Without wishing to relabel prehistoric man as a war-loving monster, we aim rather to challenge this peaceful image somewhat. Ethnography invites us to do just this by highlighting the importance of war in pre-state societies at a social, political, and economic level.

Traditional archeological approaches, which tend to focus upon fortifications, weaponry, and executions, have only been able to identify certain aspects of this social phenomenon which, like violence, is an inherent part of human behavior. Ancient warfare and, in particular, short-lived battles and conflicts rarely left any trace in terms of material evidence. Former battlefields are now anonymous and have often since been transformed into peaceful landscapes. Open spaces, once dotted with shell-craters, have become tranquil golf courses. Graves can only survive under good conditions and thus a great deal of evidence is destroyed over time. Archeologists are well aware that the number of finds relating to a particular period or culture is always very low in relation to the original size of the population. This accounts for the difficulties experts face when piecing together demographic reconstructions and explains why lengthy controversies may follow.

Archeologists rarely have the opportunity to interpret evidence relating to conflict since, for this to happen, delicate conditions need to be maintained over time in order to preserve both human remains and material artifacts. Yet prehistorians cannot fail to acknowledge that violent, if not murderous, encounters must have occurred in prehistory. This is more evident today than ever before, since reconstructing social contexts and mapping their progressive complexity over time has now become more than just an objective of archeology: it is a legitimate exercise in its own right. Essential evidence of violence in oral cultures, hunter-gatherer societies, and tribal populations is also well documented in anthropology, thus adding credibility to the theory that warring factions existed in prehistory. Keeley's excellent work entitled *War Before Civilization* adopts a similar comparative approach, focusing upon prehistoric, ethnographic, and state societies. This is substantiated with statistical evidence which leaves little doubt that violence and warfare featured in pre-state societies.

"Primitive" warfare is not a new topic of investigation, having first been tackled by Hobbes and Rousseau – the bibliography of related works is now endless. This book aims neither to be scholarly nor exhaustive. Aimed at a broad readership and written by a prehistorian and a medical doctor specialized in ancient pathology, the primary aim of this work is to outline certain problems, to discuss particular pieces of archeological evidence, and to raise questions: in short, to present rather than to prove. At no point does this work aim to make generalizations, preferring instead to focus upon a handful of the many issues relating to this complex field – a field made all the more complex by the vast range of cultures that have characterized human society over time and space. The pitfalls of basing this work upon a few select issues are clear; for this reason, it was necessary to delimit the subject matter. Mediterranean and European prehistory and protohistory form the main

emphasis of discussion, although examples are occasionally taken from other parts of the world. The main subject for discussion can be summarized in two simple questions: What do we know about the violence and first conflicts of the Mediterranean and Europe? How should we interpret existing evidence? Answering the latter question is far from easy. One view is that confrontations are rooted in a long and distant history. The ideological construction of the warrior thus evolved over time and, once established, led to the emergence and widespread acceptance of an ideal: the hero.

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# *Introduction*

## **Bloodshed at the Beginning of History**

Before delving into the depths of prehistory, it is useful to gain an initial overview of the beginning of history, a time when the first states and earliest towns, in their thirst for domination, became locked in an endless cycle of conflict. Such instability characterized the cities of Sumer in Mesopotamia from around 3000 to 2500 BCE. At this time, Sumerian city-states were already at war and destroying one another, disputing territories, seizing each others' troops, and employing force to rob neighboring towns of their riches.<sup>1</sup> Treasures from the royal tombs of Ur reveal the full splendor of these riches: gold, silver, and bronze vessels, sophisticated weaponry, and jewelry made from precious metals and exotic stones which include lapis lazuli imported all the way from mines in Afghanistan. One burial ground dating from around 2,500 years ago was found to contain the "Standard of Ur," a double-sided panel decorated with scenes of figures. The panel is made of a mosaic of shells inlaid with carnelian and lapis lazuli and set in bitumen (see plate 1). One side shows battle scenes and prisoners being captured. Chariots, laden with projectiles and pulled by onagers, charge over fallen enemies while prisoners file, stripped of their clothing, before the king and his dignitaries. The central section shows yet more defeated prisoners, again stripped of their clothing, being escorted by a victorious army of infantrymen all wearing helmets and protected by heavy capes. This indicates that there was a real army with infantrymen and chariots of war. Sumerian soldiers actually had a range of weapons at their disposal – pikes, axes, clubs, daggers – and were able to defend themselves with their shields. Their weaponry also included a ceremonial dagger which was a kind of sword with a crescent-shaped blade, resembling a saber. The bow, though less widely used at this time, soon reappeared on the battlefield.